THE HEALER
February 11, 2007

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 1
Luke 6: 17–19

"They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. . . .
And all in the crowd were trying to touch him."
Luke 6: 18–19 (NRSV)

Almighty God, we pray for your blessing
on the church in this place.
Here may the faithful find salvation
and the careless be awakened.
Here may the doubting find faith
and the anxious be encouraged.
Here may the tempted find help
and the sorrowful comfort.
Here may the weary find rest
and the strong be renewed.
Here may the aged find consolation
and the young be inspired;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Presbyterian Church (USA)

We come here this morning, O God, out of our individuality and solitariness.
Help us, as we worship this morning, to know again your love, which makes us a community, a congregation, a communion.
As they came years ago to be touched by Jesus, so we are here to be touched
and startled again by your welcoming love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

There is a peculiar but common ritual that happens, I have noticed, when I have occasion to travel. As the plane taxis to the gate, comes to a stop, the little bell rings, everyone stands up, with one hand reaches up to open the overhead compartment to retrieve luggage, and with the other hand extracts a cell phone from pocket or purse

and activates it. The conversations all over the plane are pretty much the same: “Hey, I’m here. What’s up?” The ubiquitous cellular phone, now an omnipresent symbol of our age, allows us to communicate, or at least be in touch with one another, all the time. People chat away everywhere—airports, restaurants, automobiles (not within city limits here, although I have noticed that the ordinance has not altered behavior much). Cell phones ring in church and at the movies and, of course, strangest of all, when people are walking down the sidewalk, people seemingly talking to themselves but engaged in conversation with someone somewhere. I’m sure it has happened to you. Someone approaches, talking. You assume they are addressing you. You respond. They’re not talking to you at all. They’re on the phone, talking to a friend in New York City. Taxi drivers talk nonstop, in a literal Pentecost of different languages, and once, during a wedding rehearsal, the groom’s phone rang and he took the call, proceeded to have a business conversation as we all listened in. “Hey, I’m here,” we all say standing in the aisle of the plane, a mantra that expresses something deep and important about us and our need to be “in touch.”

“They had come to hear him and he healed them of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Luke 6:18–19).

People reach out to touch Jesus—his hands, his cloak, even the fringe of his garment. Jesus reaches out and touches people, reaches across the chasm of religion and social custom and touches people who are not supposed to be touched, and they are healed. Twenty-nine times in the Gospels, Jesus touches people, many of them recorded in the Gospel of Luke, who himself was a physician.

In the text today, Luke tells us that people were coming to him from miles away: from Jerusalem in the south, to Tyre and Sidon in the north, two Gentile cities. Luke seems to be saying here, and elsewhere, that all are welcome, that Jesus’ gracious acceptance and compassionate love is unconditional and inclusive. No one is excluded. In fact, Luke goes out of his way to tell about Jesus intentionally including at mealtime, for instance, those who are excluded by social custom and religious law and his touching and healing those who are literally the untouchables of the day. Healing, by reaching out and touching the undesirable, the unclean, the taboo, the outcast, the marginal and excluded, the poor and the sick, is a major theme in Luke’s gospel.

In his commentary on this passage, New Testament scholar Fred Craddock suggests that there are societal issues here and warns the preacher not to “sail above economic realities.” For us those economic realities are immediate. Forty-six million Americans have no health insurance, and in a health care system that depends on private insurance for access to care, that spells tragedy. We have created a three-tier health care system in which the top tier receives the best health care in the world and the bottom tier has trouble even getting into the system. Hospital emergency departments end up being the primary health service deliverer for the poor, without adequate government funding, with disastrous results: while the number of emergency room visits has increased dramatically in the past twelve years to something like 114 million annually, the actual number of hospital emergency rooms has decreased 14%. Our Judeo-Christian tradition assumes that one of the basic responsibilities of the community is the health of its citizens—that health care is a right, not a privilege reserved for the wealthy, and so fixing the health care crisis in our nation is a top religious as well as political priority in the days ahead.

I’ll never forget a conversation with the late David Skinner, Clerk of Session here for years, Chief of Surgery at the University of Chicago, President and CEO of New York Hospital, one of the leading thoracic surgeons in the world. David was invited to lecture and mentor thoracic surgeons in China. I asked him how he found China’s totally socialist health care system and how it compared with our own. David said that if you are very sick, our system is the best in the world and China’s is not. But if you need basic care and are poor, China’s system is one of the best in the world and ours is not so good.

Our system is, of course, the most expensive in the world, by a wide margin. And we simply must figure out how to extend it to include the poor, the 46 million of our neighbors who do not have access to it.

Healing has always been part of what religion encompasses. The earliest healers, medicine men, shamans, were also priests, holy people. Jesus was known as a healer. In fact, the root of the words *salvation* and *savior* is health, healer, shalom, peace, wholeness, well-being. Since the Enlightenment, however, we have separated religion and healing, regarded medicine as a science having to do with the physical body, and the soul, the spirit, as the focus of religion. Now, interestingly, we are reexamining that traditional dichotomy. New studies continue to suggest a close relationship, indeed a synthesis of body and spirit, and a broader definition of healing to include the whole person. Healing the whole person may or may not include the curing of disease, but is a new way to think about it.

One of the important new understandings is that relationships, community, closeness is an important part of health and healing and that there is much about our culture that makes that reality difficult. Someone has said that loneliness, isolation, is the major disease of our age.

God Grew Tired of Us is the title of a fascinating motion picture about the experience of the Lost Boys of Sudan, some of whom have now settled in the United States. Our own Karen Howell is deeply involved in the project, which has brought several of the Lost Boys to Chicago. The film features John Bul Dau, a thoughtful, articulate young man who spent his boyhood tending his family's herd of cattle in southern Sudan. His village was destroyed in the terrible civil war of the '80s; many of the adult men and women were killed, the rest scattered. John and thousands of other young boys, most of them members of the Dinka tribe, started on a thousand-mile trek that ended in a refugee camp in Kenya.

The film covers a four-year period from the refugee camp to the United States, where the Lost Boys, young men now, confronted for the first time escalators, indoor plumbing, shopping centers, and doughnuts. In a *New York Times* review and interview, John Bul Dau explained how the refugees survived by supporting and taking care of one another. When the food ran out in the camp, the energy dropped and people became depressed and sullen. Several of the boys would gather at a grove of trees, to talk and laugh and even joke about their plight, and the bonds of affection and laughter seemed to have almost healing power.

The American director of the film said the biggest surprise for the boys when they first came to this country, bigger even than escalators and indoor plumbing, was the isolation. He said the boys weren't prepared for that. John's roommate called him once a month after they arrived. He was sitting in the apartment by himself, and he said, "This is the very first time in my life I've ever, ever been alone."

The director observed that in Dinka culture, family and the care of neighbors is central. John said, "We found out, when you don't have your immediate family, you have to form one." John is sending money back to Sudan to build a clinic. He told the interviewer that "if somebody got sick in the village, twelve or eighteen guys would carry them to the hospital 75 miles away. Half would lock arms and carry the person, then they would rotate, so they could always keep running" (*New York Times*, 20 December 2006).

I loved that picture: young men carrying a sick villager to the hospital, taking turns carrying so the urgent pace could be maintained and the patient brought to the place of healing, healing that began with the love and compassion and concern of the community. And I couldn't help thinking about those 46 million Americans and the fact that this great country can't figure out how to get them to the hospital. And I couldn't help thinking about those wonderful scenes in the Gospels of people bringing their family and friends, literally carrying the sick, to Jesus and Jesus touching them and healing them.

Brent Smith has written a fine essay, "Cell Phone Theology," in which he remembers that the great Paul Tillich observed that you can see the deepest longings and ultimate concerns of a culture by looking at its particularities and peculiarities. Smith said the cell phone is one form of the eternal human struggle to overcome isolation and to be in relationship.

He cites the television ad that promises that when you buy the company's cell phone you become part of a large crowd of people, a community, a national network who are always there, ready to be helpful. Smith said the message of that commercial is that "you are not alone," a message that speaks powerfully "to the desire for stronger communal bonds in a time of increasing individual isolation."

That is part of what the church is for, to be a community, bound together by common faith in Jesus Christ and the bonds of affection that are part of his love. The church exists to express his unconditional, inclusive love to the world, to be a place of welcome, hospitality, where hunger can be filled and brokenness healed. At its best and most authentic, the church, any church, is a contemporary version of that scene in the text today: people bringing other people to Jesus to be touched by him so that healing and wholeness can begin. How utterly sad that the church in our time is better known for the barriers it constructs to keep people out than for its grace and love that welcomes and supports and affirms and includes all—all, in the name of Jesus.

Diane Butler Bass has a recent, fine new book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, a study of mainline congregations that, contrary to the national trend, are alive, vital, and growing. They come in all shapes and styles, folksy and formal, liberal and conservative. A reporter asked Bass what makes a congregation vital, what they do that is new and different, and she said what they do is as old as Christian faith itself and as central as Jesus himself: they practice hospitality and healing.

You have to work at it in a big church in a big city. Many congregations are extended families, small enough that everyone knows everyone else. I've served congregations in which it was impossible for anyone to be sick, in the hospital, have surgery, without everyone else knowing about it. And so every birth and death, every illness, every crisis, and every joy was shared by a community. It's not that way here. Here you can be sick and alone, here isolation and loneliness are exacerbated by illness, and illness is exacerbated by isolation—so we have to be intentional. And we are, but we all have to be part of it. People regularly say, "I've been in the hospital. I thought about calling, but you're so busy down there. I'm fine now." Please don't do that. We are a vital, authentic church, a body of Christ, to the degree that expresses his welcome, his compassion, and his healing touch.

If you have been sick yourself, and who hasn't, if you have been in the hospital, had surgery, or were confined to your bed, you know the healing power of touch, the comfort and reassurance of a hand touching your arm. If you have experienced pain—which is one of the most isolating experiences you can have,—you know the healing power of touch, the power of human love, expressed even in a telephone call.

When he was seriously ill and battling a cancer that had crippled him and threatened to kill him, author Reynolds Price decided to let his friends know what was going on, and they began to call and write, to express concern and offer encouragement and prayer. He recovered and remembers, "I thought I could feel their hope like a firm wind at my back. It felt like pressure of transmitted courage sent from as far off as Britain and Africa, and that was the thing I most needed now" (*A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing,* p. 22).

Good friend and former Associate Pastor here, Nancy Enderle, concluded her Christmas letter this year with a remarkable story. I called her and asked her if I could use it, because it is such an eloquent testimony to the truth I am trying to explain.

Nancy and Gordon had a recent health scare with their son, Rhys. Everything has turned out fine. The scare was nothing more than that. But for several weeks they waited nervously for test results.

Nancy wrote, "This ordeal illuminated a couple of things: one was the amazing blessing we receive each day we are privileged to spend with our loved ones. Nothing—absolutely nothing should ever be taken for granted."

The second thing came as she anticipated a lot of waiting in the hospital and decided to fill the time by entering the names and addresses of all her friends in her computer and formatting them for mailing labels. Nancy wrote,

> As I opened my address book and started writing your names, I became overwhelmed with the awareness that you are all with us as we went through this difficult time. It wasn't busy work at all—it was a profound reminder that even in a tense and nerve-wracking place far from most of you. our friendships and relationships mattered more than I ever imagined. So as you toss our envelope into the recycling bin, stop and look at your label and please know what a comfort your friendship brought to a nervous mother in a hospital waiting room. Thank you for "being there."

I confess that even though I am a thorough Presbyterian, every time I'm in a church that has candles to light for the sick, I drop money in the box and light a candle—or two or three. We've been doing it for years: for parents and children, for babies and parents-to-be, for colleagues, for sick friends, for grieving or worried or anxious or frightened friends. I do it because I believe there is healing power in love. I do it because it represents what this faith of ours is about finally—bringing our own brokenness, our own pain and fear, and our dear ones and friends into the presence of Jesus who welcomed all, whose touch was healing, whose love was and is forever.

Amen.